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# Efforts at 'important stage,' but White House mum

By Mary Belcher  
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The Reagan administration yesterday clamped a tight lid on discussion of its efforts to free 39 American hostages in Beirut and refused to comment on Lebanese Shi'ite leader Nabih Berri's offer to move them to a Western embassy or Syria.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes said only that the United States will not agree to any "preconditions" set on the hostages' release and that diplomatic efforts to resolve the situation are continuing.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard Lugar, R-Ind., after meeting with President Reagan, told reporters that diplomatic efforts to resolve the hos-

tage crisis are at "a very important stage."

"I'm very hopeful," Sen. Lugar said, declining to discuss details.

At the State Department, press spokesman Edward Djerejian brushed aside all questions on the crisis, which began 14 days ago with the hijacking of an American plane in Athens by Shi'ite Moslems.

Restricting official comment to a single sentence, Mr. Djerejian said, "The proper solution is the prompt release of the hostages."

Israeli intelligence sources reported they expected a breakthrough in the situation "very soon."

(In Jerusalem, Israeli Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin said Israel will continue to release Lebanese held

in Atlit prison, with the expectation that hundreds more will be freed quickly.)

Mr. Speakes did react to one new development in the crisis: yesterday's release of hostage Jimmy Dell Palmer, 48, of Little Rock, Ark., who was freed because of health problems.

"We're glad to have that release," Mr. Speakes said. "All of the hostages ought to be released without preconditions."

Mr. Berri yesterday offered to move the hostages — now believed held in south Beirut — to a Western embassy in Beirut or to Syria, until the demands of the hijackers are met. The hijackers have demanded that

Israel release more than 700 Shi'ite prisoners, and Mr. Berri has called for a pullback of U.S. warships in the eastern Mediterranean.

"Our position is that all of the hostages should be released immediately, without precondition," Mr. Speakes said, refusing to comment on Mr. Berri's offer to move the hostages.

"Israel's policy on returning prisoners to Lebanon is a matter of record," he said, referring to the Israeli release of 31 prisoners Monday.

The U.S. warships in the Mediterranean are in international waters, Mr. Speakes said.

The president met with his

national security advisers for an hour yesterday on the hostage crisis. Mr. Speakes would not comment on the meeting.

The administration continues to pursue a diplomatic resolution to the hostage crisis, but it is considering other steps such as closing the Beirut airport if diplomatic efforts fail.

Administration officials are in close communication with Mr. Berri, whom they believe has the influence to resolve the hostage crisis, Mr. Speakes said.

He said further, "we've been in close touch with the government of Syria as part of our efforts to resolve the situation. President [Hafez] Assad has expressed the desire to be helpful, and is in a position to be helpful."

Mr. Speakes would not expand on the Syrian efforts.